

## **The “Bantu Complex”: Articulating the Paleoecological and Archaeological Signals of Agopastoralist Migrations in Central Africa**

Christopher A. Kiahtipes, Ph.D.

Postdoctoral Fellow, Institute for the Advanced Study of Culture and the Environment,  
University of South Florida, Tampa, USA.

### Abstract:

*Since the term ‘Bantu’ was introduced by linguists in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, researchers have sought to circumscribe the boundaries of a Bantu culture in sub-Saharan Africa and to unpack the causes and outcomes of one of the largest population migrations in all of human prehistory. This problem reaches beyond Africanist archaeology, as the socioecological factors and climatic contexts of the movement of Bantu speakers across Central Africa addresses central archaeological problems of forager-farmer interactions, anthropogenic landscapes, and forager adaptations to life in tropical forest biomes. However, there is an imbalance in research interest in Bantu migrations. Synchronic datasets outnumber diachronic observations and modeling of the problem emphasizes continental or regional developments over the building of case studies at smaller scales. One outcome of this imbalance is the association of food production, potting, iron metallurgy, and Bantu languages as the cornerstone of a cultural identity. Contrary to similar migrations of food producers, evidence for the impacts of these activities on vegetation cover is largely inconclusive. Climatically-driven forest fragmentation is offered as an alternative mechanism driving settlement of the forest zone, but this explanation is regularly applied on the basis of negative evidence alone. Using case studies from the Congo Basin, this presentation argues for a broader conceptualization of the archaeological problem and proposes how feedbacks between past demography, subsistence practices, and vegetation cover can provide more satisfactory and readily testable models of past migrations and their influence on the landscapes of tropical Central Africa.*